INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS:
THE PROCESS OF JOINING-UP

by

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INTRODUCTION

The growing need for individuals to feel a part of, and have a sense
of·participation in their communities, organizations and their government
is perhaps the most critical social problem of our day. In all of these
institutions, increases in size, specialization, and automation have pro-
duced organizations so difficult to understand and encompass that one can
easily be left powerless, confused, and alienated from the secret of their
workings. Organizations devised to serve men have, by their complexity,
cancerous growth, and resistance to planned change, turned men into their
servants.

Nowhere is this powerlessness and confusion more keenly felt than when
one first joins an organization or enters a community. Recall your last
job interview. Remember how you were trying to "look good" to the organiza-
tion, to guess what it wanted, what qualities it was evaluating you on.
How much time did you spend telling the interviewer what your expectations
were and asking what the organization could contribute to your needs?
Probably very little and then very cautiously. Our studies of individuals'
entries into organizations and our work with orientation and training pro-
grams has led to the conclusion that in entering an organization nearly
everyone experiences feelings of helplessness and dependency on the organiza-
tion. From a functional point of view this dependency seems necessary in
order that the organization can begin to socialize the incoming member to
fit in with its norms and values, its way of doing things. Yet our observa-
tions have led us to conclude that most organizations overdo this-they tend to
oversocialize their members. The phase of entry into an organization seems to
be a critical period for the new members. Individuals who are overpowered

and overcontrolled by organizational constraints become listless passive members. Those who are challenged by the tasks they face and encouraged toward responsibility can move toward success and mastery of their organizational life.

In this essay we would like to share some of our attempts to assist individuals in entering organizations. James Coleman has noted that while we are prepared in our youth, through family, friends, and school, to deal with our personal lives and with our relationships in small groups, nowhere are we prepared to deal with large institutions. The programs described here are designed to meet this later problem. In a sense we have seen ourselves in these programs as the individual's ombudsman, helping him to negotiate a meaningful "psychological contract" with the organization. By designing training/orientation programs that encourage the individual to find answers to the questions that are meaningful and important to him and by creating situations where the individual can bargain equally with influential members of the organization, we attempt to increase the individuals self control over his socialization into the organization. Our focus will be on educational institutions for it is here, ironically enough, that the problems of over-socialization into the student role are most critical. The increasing campus rebellion[2] is a clear signal that young men and women will no longer tolerate the subtle subjugation of universities designed for teaching and not for learning. Legitimate processes for student participation and influence in the educational process must be developed or the rational climate of university life will not prevail.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT AND THE PROCESS OF JOINING UP

All of us have experienced the "first meeting" of an academic class. Typically, the teacher passes out some material (reading lists, exam schedules, procedures with respect to homework), tells the students something about the course and sometimes gives the students a chance to ask questions. If the students do ask any questions, they are generally of the form: How long should the term paper be? Will exams be essay or short answers? What happens if you don't turn in all the homework?

One way to conceptualize what is going on during this "first meeting" is that the teacher and students are working out the dimensions of a psychological contract. A psychological contract is formed between every individual and the organizations of which he is a member. This contract like any contract deals with what the organization expects of the individual and what contributions the individual will make to meet these expectations. It also deals with what expectations the individual has of the organization and what contribution the organization is prepared to make to meet these expectations. The psychological contract is unlike a legal contract in that it defines a dynamic, changing relationship that is continually being renegotiated. Often important aspects of the contract are not formally agreed upon -- key organizational and individual expectations are sometimes unstated, implicit are premises about the relationships.

Yet this contract is a reality which has a great many implications for productivity and individual satisfaction. An organization filled with "cheated" individuals who expect far more than they get is headed for trouble. The rebel who refuses to meet key organizational expectations

becomes a stumbling block to production. On the other hand individual creativity is likely to be thottled in an organization which demands total compliance to peripheral norms such as manner of dress.[3]

This contract setting process, as it is normally handled, contains the seeds from which future disaffection will grow. The typical first meeting (orientation programs in industrial organizations are very similar) is a very one-sided process. Most of the communication flows from the teacher to the individual.

One effect of this one-sided process is to create the feeling in the new student that the organization is much more powerful than he is an individual. This feeling of powerlessness that the student experiences often leads him to be more passive than he might ordinarily be or feel is appropriate in this situation. The teacher often reads this passivity as a sign that the student wants and needs more direction and control - he wants to be told exactly what to do. This situation can create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

A second, more immediate effect of the one-sided process can be observed in the nature of the questions students ask on this day of class. Seldom do they question the teacher as to his role in the class, his theory of learning, his assumptions about grading, what they can expect to learn from this class and the future value of such learnings. Rather, they try to second guess the teacher, asking questions they think the teacher wants to hear. It is not unusual to find that many people soon get the feeling that the course is dull, boring, unexciting, and feel as if they are wasting their time. They end up passively sitting

in class every week (if they bother to keep attending), uninvolved in their own learning, and working to meet the teacher's expectations in order to get a grade. Their own expectations for learning, involvement, stimulation, etc. go unsatisfied, in large measure because they were never encouraged to make such expectations explicit.

Within the context of an experimental course in Organizational Psychology at the M.I.T. Sloan School of Management, we have implemented a new "first meeting" format. Small groups of students meet to discuss their expectations of the course and what they expect to contribute to the achievement of these expectations. In these small groups of peers students feel more free to raise the real issues that concern them and gain the strength from one another to confront the teacher with their true feelings. Representatives of these small groups are then interviewed by the teacher with the remainder of the class observing. The process is then reversed with the students, after again meeting in small groups, choosing representatives who interview the teacher as to his expectation, goals, assumptions, etc. Both sides of the contract are then examined, possible areas of conflict noted, and mechanisms developed for handling these conflicts and differences as they arise. It is our feeling that this contract setting process and our commitment to it did much to stimulate the students' interest, motivation and commitment to their own learning. The creation of a structure in which students felt it was legitimate to question the teacher and to participate in the learning process caused much of the student passivity to disappear. The contractual process which emphasized the reciprocal nature of the teaching/learning process seemed to stimulate in students a desire to be responsible for their own learning.

This very small experience focusing on the first class meeting served as a jumping off point for two experimental programs in which we have been involved with the Peace Corps training programs.[4] Each was a one-week workshop held at the beginning of the training program. Our basic assumption was that the joining-up process, as we have come to call it, would be most successful if the Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV) felt committed to achieving the Peace Corps' goals and when the PC felt committed to help and support the PCV in whatever way it could. From the PCV's point of view, this required that he be able to confront both the organization (PC) and himself - to understand the strengths and weaknesses of both - in order to feel comfortable that his decision to join was a good one. It is only when a person feels comfortable about his decision to join that he can begin to develop the commitment necessary to participate in a meaningful way.

There is another way in which we can view the process of organizational socialization and the notion of the psychological contract. In approaching any new organization, an individual makes two classes of decisions - a decision to join and a decision to participate. In some cases, such as the military or a prison, for example, the individual may have no control over the decision to join. In these cases, the socialization process and psychological contract become extremely structured (many policies, rules and limits).

There are many cases where the individual does have control over the decision to join. One often finds, however, that the factors a person uses to help him make the decision to join tend to be unrelated to longer-run, higher order goals he may have. For example, when interviewing a

company for a job, most people ask questions about pay, fringe benefits,
insurance plans, vacations and the like. Few ask about the challenge of
their first job or opportunities for personal growth and development.
The major point is that the process by which we decide to join an or-
ganization has implications for the manner - in terms of commitment,
motivation, involvement - in which we participate in the organization on
a day-to-day basis.

In very simplified form, the SAW design incorporated elements aimed
at helping the PCV confront both the organization and himself. A key com-
ponent was a series of daily, one hour "free university" sessions which
were staffed by the PC training staff, PC Washington representatives, and
host country nationals. PCV's were encouraged to utilize these resources
and get the answers to any questions they felt were important both in
terms of their decision to join and their ability to feel committed to
the goals of the Peace Corps. Significant steps were taken during these
sessions to lay the groundwork for the psychological contract which would
be in operation during the remainder of training and for the duration of
the two year tour.

After the free university session, PCV's met in small groups
with a member of the workshop staff[5] to discuss their reactions. When
necessary during these sessions, we confronted the PCV's (and they con-
fronted each other) when it was clear that issues of real concern were
being ducked or avoided during the free university sessions.

The second key component was a series of experiential simulations in
which PCV's participated in small groups. These simulations were designed
to help PCV's become more aware of their teaching - change agent styles,

interpersonal relationship styles, ways of entering new groups and cul-
tures, and other issues related to cross cultural transition. The in-
sights and learnings gained from these simulations generated further
questions and issues for discussion to be raised during the next series
of free university sessions.

It might be helpful to follow a hypothetical PCV through a typical
cycle of events. In the morning free university, he participates in a
discussion of the classroom climate in an Ethiopian school. A returned
PCV tells him that Ethiopian students have learned to expect a highly
structured, teacher-centered classroom.

During the experiential simulation that afternoon, this PCV becomes
aware of how uncomfortable he becomes in highly power motivated competitive
situations. The simulation triggered the issue which was then discussed
in his small group. The result was a series of questions about how his
own style would fit into the expectations of the system he was joining.
The PCV would then assume responsibility for gathering the data necessary
to answer these questions in order to help him decide whether or not to
join the Peace Corps. This cycle, which we have come to call the
"learning loop," once initialized, becomes self-reinforcing.

In the first of the two programs, we noted great difficulty in making
the transition between this first week of training and the remainder of
the program. It became painfully clear that what he had done was to pre-
pare the volunteer to join the organization but we had failed to prepare
the organization to receive the volunteer. The PC staff felt jealous,
angry, left out - disconnected. During the second program, the PC staff

participated in a workshop very similar to the one the PCV's were experiencing in order to strengthen their own commitments. The daily free university sessions became the nodal point through which the PCV and the PC staff together worked through the issues necessary to enable them to feel mutually connected.

Research is presently underway in an attempt to systematically evaluate the impact of these workshops on future PCV performance. Preliminary results and informal reactions from PCV's and PC staff strongly suggests that in comparison to other training programs, the two experimental programs were characterized by exceptionally high commitment, enthusiasm, and collaborative effort between PCV's and PC staff.

Another experiment, based on the similar values and assumptions as those which underlie the Peace Corps programs described, was conducted at the Broadmeadows Junior High in Quincy, Mass., during the first three days of school in the Fall of 1968. Calling the sessions "Tune-In Time," faculty, staff, and interested students arranged small groups meetings between teachers and students to discuss such questions as "Who is in charge of learning?" and "What do you want to learn?" A new climate seems to have been established in the school as a result of this psychological contract, and students seem to feel that the faculty are interested in them as real people. Interestingly enough, the most observable changes seem to be in the teachers, as they allow themselves to be people rather than roles.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE UNIVERSITY

Universities recognize that the transition from high school to college is a major one for most students. They further recognize that the Freshman year is particularly important. Their response to these issues has, however, been of a form which only serves to further exacerbate the transition rather than effectively cope with it. Two examples will be sufficient.

The traditional orientation program because of its very structure and process of implementation only adds to the entering student's feelings of powerlessness, confusion, and anxiety. The student is "told," "lectured at," "described to" - he is oriented. The very definition of this word (see any dictionary) reinforces the one-way nature of the process.

Even if the student is given the opportunity to ask meaningful questions (if he could do this it would serve to equalize the power somewhat), he will be reluctant to do so. This is understandable against the background of the last twelve years of his educational socialization. He has been taught and rewarded for being a passive recipient of teaching rather than an active participant in his own learning. The words teaching and learning have been underscored for the distinction between them is central to our entire philosophy and value structure. A teacher can be primarily responsible for teaching but only the learner can be primarily responsible for learning. Most teachers equate teaching and learning - "If I am teaching you must be learning!"

Most universities today are somewhat aware that their orientation programs are less than ideal. So, in addition to whatever orientation process exists, there generally exists an advisory system wherein a small number (10-15) of Freshmen are assigned to a faculty member. Even in the best cases where the faculty member sincerely wants to be an advisor (rather than being told of his "honor" by his department chairman) he himself may know little about the system in which he lives - into which he is supposed to help the Freshmen enter. In addition, he may possess few of the interpersonal skills necessary to be a source of emotional and psychological support to the Freshmen. The advisor's role is therefore double-barrelled - technical expertise (knowledge of the university system) and interpersonal expertise. Short of a brochure little of anything is ever done to prepare the advisor for this role.

We are now in the process of designing an experimental program aimed at dealing with some of the issues raised above. One model we are considering is a program to help small groups of M.I.T. Freshmen (12-14 per group) "join up with the system" in a way which will enable them to become and remain committed rather than becoming disconnected. We would have two specific goals.

First, we would try to help the entering student develop an accurate and realistic "cognitive map" of M.I.T. as a system; its strengths, weaknesses, resources. A "free university" m4del of the type described in connection with our Peace Corps experiences is a possibility within which the Freshman is encouraged to confront faculty, administration, advisors, and other students. We do not expect that all of his questions can be or will be answered. This is not crucial. What is crucial is that the process

of asking questions and of actively seeking answers to issues of real concern be legitimized from the start.

Second, we will attempt, still within the small groups, to help each student develop an accurate, realistic "emotional map" of himself as an individual. Within the format of the small unstructured group, each student will attempt to develop a better understanding of:

    i. his own expectations of M.I.T., of himself and his reasons for coming;

    ii. the factors which operate to lower a person's commitment and motivation and ways of coping with these blocks;

    iii. and the mechanisms by which a person can set personally relevant learning and career goals and ways of moving toward achievement of these goals.

Clearly, the process of setting a psychological contract or joining up as we conceive it (in contrast with traditional orientation programs) is a two-way, two-sided process and the students represent only one party in the contract. For this reason, one crucial element in our experimental program will be the full participation in the small groups, of a small group of the faculty who are to assume advisory roles during the coming year. Faculty and students together will develop cognitive maps of M.I.T. as a system. Together they will develop interpersonal mechanisms such as warmth, openness, and trust which are necessary to insure effective levels of emotional and psychological support.

A one-week workshop will not cure all the ills of higher education. It is hoped, however, that by investing substantial energy at the point of entry a collaborative process can be initiated between students and

the system they are joining. Ideally, students and advisors will continue to meet in small groups over the year and work to develop whatever mechanisms are appropriate to reinforce the process started during the "joining up" week.

SUMMARY

The focus in this paper has been on the process by which individuals and organizations "join up" with one another. One key assumption we have made throughout which has been borne out by prior research as well as our own experiences, is that an individual's early experiences in an organization have a significant impact upon his future relationship with that organization. In some ways this is an organizational analogy to Freud's assumption concerning the impact of childhood experiences on the adult personality.

The concept of a psychological contract, which has been the cornerstone of much of our efforts, is applicable to a wide variety of situations. A second assumption we have made is that, unless the elements of that contract are spelled out explicitly at the point of entry, a host of misperceptions and assumptions develop which become self-fulfilling. In addition mechanisms must be established (e.g., a commitment to open, honest communication) to facilitate the continual renegotiation of this psychological contract for life in an organization is a dynamic process and not static. Both the individual and the organization will change over time and mechanisms and processes must be developed to facilitate these transitions.

FOOTNOTES

[1]McIntyre is also on the staff of the Achievement Motivation Development Project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

[2]There are other signs, less clear, but just as real, of growing disconnectedness between individuals, small groups, and organizations other than universities. It is difficult to understand why, for instance, there is such a phenomenally high dropout rate from training programs for the unemployed or disadvantaged. Our first reaction to such reports is often indignation, "why can't those people be more appreciative?" It is seldom that we look carefully at the organization they have joined to see if the real reason for clients rejecting the system is in the system itself.

[3]This description of the psychological contract has a specific frame of reference - an employee joining a company. One of the major strengths of this concept of psychological contract is the wide number of situations in which it is relevant (e.g., marriage which has both a legal and psychological contract).

[4]The first of these programs, called the Self-Assessment Workshop (SAW) was directed by Dr. Richard Katz of the Psychology Department at Brandeis University.

[5]There were in actuality three systems operating; PC training staff, PCV's and we, the workshop staff. We formed a separate contract with both the PCV's and the PC training staff which clearly specified our role as that of a neutral third party agent or broker (ombudsman).

[6]This learning loop is a four stage process: concrete experience → observation and reflection → formation of concepts and generalizations → testing concepts and questions in new situations → seeking new concrete experiences, etc.